DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 308 509 CS 211 897

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TITLE Agendas for Writing in Philosophy: Conflicting or Complementary?
PUB DATE 89
NOTE 22p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audience Awareness; Case Studies; College Seniors; Curriculum Design; Higher Education; Philosophy; Student Attitudes; *Student Centered Curriculum; *Writing Across the Curriculum; *Writing Instruction; Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS Writing Tasks; *Writing to Learn

ABSTRACT

Recent research on how students perceive the function of writing assignments and the effects of different kinds of writing assignments on learning is inconclusive. Noting that this issue clouds writing across the curriculum programs, a study sought to determine how students perceive their involvement in assignments that require them to present an accurate interpretation of a text. Writing assignments in two philosophy classes were studied, one on business ethics (25 students) and the other a senior seminar on the history of philosophy (15 students). To determine the way writing assignments were perceived by students, half the class sessions for each course were observed, a survey was administered to all of the students in both classes, student interviews were conducted, and writing assignments were examined. Results indicated that (1) formal writing assignments are not necessarily less conducive to learning than informal assignments; (2) the writing task in and of itself can provide compelling motivation to learn; (3) how students view the teacher as audience is equally as important as assignment genre; and (4) there is a need to encourage more exploratory and persuasive discourse. The survey form is attached. (NH)

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Agendas for Writing in Philosophy: Conflicting or Complementary ?

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Agendas for Writing in Philosophy: Conflicting or Complementary?

A discussion still clouding writing across the curriculum programs is the philosophical/theoretical debate between proponents of formalist and epistemic positions towards writing. Although these terms have recently been redefined by James Berlin (16), I am thinking of Stephen North's definition when he says that those favoring the formalist position emphasize the value of writing as a means of disciplinary socialization, while the epistemic camp holds that writing provides the "means by which individuals create their own worlds with words "(225).

Certain kinds of writing assignments and teaching practices are often associated with one or the other positions, although recent research on how students perceive the function of writing assignments and the effects of different kinds of writing assignments on learning is inconclusive (Herrington 1985, 1988). Nonetheless, the years in which a dogma developed, primarily from some combination of testimonial, anecdote, and practical advice are hard to erase.

In fact, most writing across the curriculum programs are philosophically ambidexterous, as stated neatly by Susan Mcleod:

> Programs which emphasize the importance of writing to learn do not denigrate the importance of writing for audiences other than the self, audiences with specific expectations. Programs that emphasize the importance of rhetorical expectations in particular discourse

> communities do not by definition leave out writing to learn (21).

However, certain kinds of assignments are still labeled "write to learn," as though an assignment could have some other aim. Witness, for example, the increased number of articles and the series of texts on writing in different disciplines (Biddle 1987) which emphasize the power of informal writing assignments. Writing across the curriculum workshops are still teaching that ungraded journals serve epistemic ends, while essays written to the instructor for a grade are assumed to serve formalist purposes.

The argument by now is familiar. Any emphasis, it is claimed, on learning the language of various academic communities forces students to "leave the self behind " by asking them to adopt ways of thinking and writing which they do not readily perceive as enhancing their own ability to know themselves or to make sense of their world. Therefore, the argument goes, formal writing assignments, especially those that include a three fold emphasis on mastery of a new language, internalizing the intellectual strategies that language reflects, and an accurate rendering of some text, are less conducive to learning than informal assignments. Brannon and Knoblauch, for example, assert that "teaching students academic genres is to teach them "generic constraints," (468) Learning accrues from an "open-ended investigative dialogue between learner and teacher, rather than from how close a student comes to telling the truth. " In their view those assignments that permit students "more

freedom to explore the ideas of a discipline from a personal vantage point are the most significant "write to learn experiences" (470).

Statements like this are subject to question. How, in fact, do students perceive their involvement in the execution of an assignment written for a grade that does not specifically require them to focus on themselves nor asks them to make explicit connections between the content of the course and either their views, prior knowledge of the subject or personal values? What are their attitudes towards an assignment that requires them to present an accurate interpretation of some text using a reasonable imitation of the rhetoric prized by the discipline? How are their attitudes influenced by what appears to them to be a tightly structured problem with a length limitation and a short time span for executing the assignment?

To start to resolve these questions I studied writing assignments in two philosophy classes, one in business ethics and the other a senior seminar in the history of philosophy. Both courses were taught by the same instructor. My research yielded several surprises, the most notable being that assignments not designed to do so can still elicit intense personal involvement in students. Many students regarded the nominally "formalistic" assignments as an opportunity to learn the material, a chance to explore their own ideas and do something original, by which they meant that to write their papers they had to make choices

regarding the kinds of evidence to use and the types of relationships to emphasize. What caused them to see the assignments in this light?

My study followed Herrington's (1985) approach with its emphasis on the significance of context (the specific community created in the classroom) in determining the way writing assignments are perceived. I observed half the class sessions for each course, administered a survey to all of the students in both classes (25 in the business ethics class and 15 in the seminar), conducted student interviews, and conversed at length with the instructor on many occasions, and with his help examined his writing assignments.

A typical assignment question in the history of philosophy class was the following:

> The rise of philosophy in the world of medieval Islam posed new problems for both the Muslims and the Jews living in Islamic lands concerning the relationship between religious faith and philosophical reason. The working out of this relationship in Islamic and Jewish philosophy of the Middle Ages showed both continuities and discontinuities with the way the same problem was resolved in Western Christendom from the time of St. Augustine until the end of the 12th century.
>
> In a short (3-5) page essay develop the continuities and the discontinuities between the early medieval Christian working out of the relationship between faith and reason and the way this theme developed in Islamic and Jewish contexts. In your essay compare and contrast one Christian philosopher (Augustine, Anselm, or Abelard) with one Muslim (Alfarbi, Averrroes) or Maimonides as the representative Jewish philosopher. Be specific in your references to the text.

This example is typical of the kinds of assignments this instructor uses in all his courses. They tend to be similar

in structure and differ only in the complexity of the questions.

On its face this assignment belongs squarely in the formalistic camp. It certainly does not appear to leave much room for personal involvement or self-exploration. In fact, this was not the case at all. After describing the students attitudes towards assignments similar to this one, I will have more to say about why assignments like these elicit responses from students associated with informal assignments.

The questionnaire survey of the entire class showed that students felt personally involved in the assignments. Particularly in the advanced class, the students indicated a very positive attitude towards the assignment as a powerful tool for learning. Two-thirds of the students in that class agreed that "exploring and shaping my own ideas about a subject" is as important a purpose as "demonstrating knowledge." More than half of the students in both classes believe that the instructor values "synthesizing material in original relationships" and "presenting original ideas not expressed in class or the readings." (Survey) The interviews were even more revealing about their attitudes towards the assignments. The three students whose interviews I describe below were selected because their comments were representative of students who volunteered for the interviews (five students from the business ethics class; six students from the seminar).

Unlike Herrington's discourse-based interviews (1985) mine were open-ended. Students were asked to try to identify the qualities of the assignments and their relationship to classroom instruction which made them (the students) say that the assignments invited the exploring and shaping of ideas and the presentation of original ideas not expressed in class or in readings. Though all three students gave similar reasons for feeling this way, they differed somewhat in emphasis. Two of the students, Penny and Mike, emphasized the latitude in the assignment for originality, but the third student, Louise, focused more on the opportunity the assignment offered for synthesizing course material. My discussion with all three students dealt primarily with the assignment tasks, their attitudes towards the instructor as audience, and the relationship of assignments to class discussion and readings. Their responses are summarized below.

Penny, a senior majoring in philosophy, asserted that her major reason for finding the assignment engaging was that it focused on a "hard problem." The purpose of the assignment, she felt, was to show that you understand the problem, and how various positions taken to it lead to different solutions. She said, "I can't solve these problems. It's important to see them. I'm not looking for an answer, but a chance to understand the problem. The paper is a chance to understand the history of the subject. That's

all we can do. If I can just understand what the philosophers have said, I have achieved something."

As she went on to try to describe the reasons the assignment leaves room for personal involvement, Penny kept coming back to the nature of the problem the assignment presented. "If you have a really interesting question, there are lots of ways into it. People can interpret it differently." In addition to interpretive breadth, Penny asserted that the assignment also "encourages you to test your own point of view on the question as well because you explore the perspectives of a variety of figures [philosophers] to a question," apparently one of the most challenging parts of the assignment for her. "Yes," she said, "when you see the problem through so and so's point of view, it looks like this, so his answer looks like this... and you can also imagine how your point of view would be different."

Presenting the material also calls for some originality. Penny found that the assignments could not be completed by merely restating what was said in class or in the reading. "In writing the paper," she said, "I am not simply stating what he said, but translating it, finding the point of contact with other philosophers' statements. That's not always easy." She added, "Readings, lectures and class discussion are intimately related, but you need to figure out those relationships and express them in your paper."

Penny found that expressing someone else's ideas requires personal involvement with the concepts. "I perceive myself as struggling to simply get a tiny grasp of an immense problem so you can talk about it in an intelligible way." Her use of the words "translation" and "intelligible" suggest that she was striving for an appropriate individual rhetoric, though her concern about form seemed not to constrain her thinking about the content. On the contrary, she indicated that guidelines in the assignment instructions about form contribute to good thinking: "The 3-5 page limit forces you to think and write clearly. He only wants 3-5 pages on extremely complex questions. You need to be very concise, and that's part of his purpose in giving only 3-5 pages. It really puts the pressure on to think clearly." It is interesting that Penny feels that "thinking clearly" in no way interferes with possibilities for interpretation or reflecting on one's own views about the subject.

Penny's feeling that personal reflection and interpretation can coexist with careful and cogent thinking may in part be related to her understanding of the kind of audience her instructor will be when he reads the paper. Penny believes that he is primarily interested in the content of the paper, though the following statements about content reflect her sense that form and content may be inseparable for this instructor. She regretfully admitted that she does not end her papers well, "because I am exhausted at that time. You know how you are supposed to end

papers by restating the question...but I never do that. If your paper is very good it does not matter. He [the instrucor] wants to see that you are grappling with the subject...wrestling with it. It's got to be in the paper. I think the structure is secondary, but as one gets to understand the issue it takes care of itself. It [the structure] could even get in the way of the idea if it doesn't follow from the content."

Mike, a senior but not a philosophy major, also emphasized how much the subject influenced his attitude towards the assignment by saying that for him a major function of the assignment was to understand a difficult, but very significant question: "He [the instructor] wants you to know the material, what Augustine said (I really liked the papers on Augustine), because it is so important. We try to get inside his head; he wants you to know each philosopher, where he plugs in, but I still don't know. In one philosophy course....." This afterthought reflects how much Mike is impressed with the difficulty of the task. For Mike, the assignment requires a great interpretive effort, but one that is worthwhile, as he indicated by remarking, "He is trying to get us to enter into something --to really get behind what is said." The comparative but structured nature of the question adds to that challenge: "Usually what we do is compare two philosophers. He gives us a specific question--and we work with that. He tries to get you to see

many connections. He is constantly going back. It's interesting to see how they draw all together."

Mike found, as Penny did, that the assignment gave him a chance to think about the personal relevance of the material. When asked to explain how he thinks about the audience for the paper, Mike said, "I guess I am writing for the instructor, but for me its always personal. I try to see how I can use the material to make my own decisions. In a sense, I am also writing to myself." Like Penny, he saw his effort to discuss the material in "his own words" as a chance for originality: "Just formulating the material myself with the notes, with the material we talked about in class, seems to give it a different angle. I suppose some people might just rewrite their own notes, but not me. It takes me a long time; it involves a lot of creative writing."

Mike, even more than Penny, commented on the benefits of drawing original relationships between class discussion and the readings: "It [the assignment] makes you think about the ideas --kind of swimming back there, what we talked about during the past weeks. You must look at your notes and tie things together. I think you comprehend it after rehashing it, putting it into your own words."

Mike had less to say about the form of the assignment than Penny did but, like her, felt that the limitation on the length of the paper is a positive characteristic of the assignment: "When I write a paper, --it's amazing how much I

remember--especially because they are short and focused on one area. Summing up, Mike said, "I put a lot of energy into it, and I get a lot out of it."

Louise, a senior but not a philosophy major, agreed with her classmates that the major purpose of the assignment was to understand the problem. She began by saying "The most important thing is to understand the question. You must try to get a comprehensive view of what the question is," though she did not expand to the extent the other students did on the nature of the questions themselves. Instead, Louise demonstrated by the frequency of her comments on the 'usefulness' of the assignments that she was engaged by them primarily because they helped her learn the course content. "I use the papers to organize what we have done in class. They give me a chance to see if I understand what has been talked about. They really help you to learn the material. Writing the papers makes me feel more in control, like I have handle on it." She acknowledged that synthesis is at the heart of this effort: "I enjoy the challenge of putting it together."

When Louise discussed form she seemed more concerned about certain features than Penny or Mike were, but never expressed the view that form was restrictive. She said, "I understand he wants it organized well, stated clearly, but no particular form. You need to be organized. Don't go off on tangents. Put some kind of conclusion on. I try to write my paper as if I was explaining it to someone who did not

know anything about philosophy, though the audience could be someone educated in philosophy. Dr. S wouldn't mind."

We must conclude from these students' remarks that despite the tightly structured character of the assignments and the students' knowledge that they would be graded, Penny, Louise and Mike viewed them as opportunities to learn the course material as well as to explore their own ideas. This was the case, apparently, because the assignments involve significant and important questions which have several possible responses and require students to draw original relationships between material presented in class discussion and readings. Expressing the material in appropriate ways, they said, was also part of the challenge, though not a major consideration since the instructor is not rigid regarding matters of form. As the nature of this study implies, I did not expect to be able to explain fully student attitudes toward the assignments through an analysis of the assignments themselves. However, it is clear that the assignments are characterized by features which lead to learning and exploration coupled with a realization on the part of some of the students that this is happening.

The assignments are challenging, in part because they pose legitimate problems. As Herrington discovered, when students believe there is an issue at stake, they are more apt to see the assignment as a learning experience. She is using "issue" in the Aristotelian sense -- a matter that offers alternative possibilities for deliberation and

inquiry. (1985) The instructor agreed with this point of view. Referring to the assignment quoted earlier he said, "It's pretty complicated to see the way a problem is worked out in one culture as opposed to another. Many of my assignments require a similar kind of tough analysis."

But apart from "tough analysis," the assignments encourage exploration because of the comparative nature of the required task. Students are not being asked to solve problems but to examine the processes philosophers used to tackle these questions, many of whom drew on the same material but arrived at different resolutions. Again referring to the assignment quoted above, the professor said, "The paper asks them to show how fate and reason were distinguished and united by two philosophers representing different traditions." It seems that by tracing this process students find themselves participating in the dialectic and considering their own opinions on the subject, even though the presentation of their own ideas was not the explicit aim of the paper. Said in another way, although the students do not execute an original "exploration," they write in the genre James Kinneavy describes as "exploratory," one that encourages a willingness to reflect and a reluctance to come to closure (1987).

Finally, the impulse to explore, and to use the assignment as a vehicle for learning the material is encouraged by the sense of security that comes from knowing that the content for the assignment is limited and

retrievable, since the base material can be found in unsynthesized form in the readings or class notes.

It is also very important in trying to understand the reasons for the success of the assignments to note that the students lack of concern about coming up with the "right answer" is based on their perception that the instructor is more interested in the assignment as a learning device than as a test. Barbara Walvoord's description of this response fits the case exactly: "The students seem to view this instructor as a teacher who is interested in "their learning and musing process, the way they develop a topic, the importance they attach to an intellectual task" (21). This is the condition that Herrington cites as crucial to students' attitudes towards the function of the assignment (1985).

My interview with the instructor and classroom observations confirmed the students' view of the function of the writing assignment. The instructor's attitude towards writing assignments is dictated by a philosophy of teaching which favors process over product. The goal of all his courses, he said, is to "get students to reason well in philosophy, which involves the ability to analyze philosophical arguments, compare and contrast them with contending arguments on the same issues, and finally to apply them to current problems." He emphasized the importance of their learning to talk like philosophers, to get them to see that there is a difference between the way

things are said in the text and the way we talk about them.

He favors class discussion rather than lecture and includes a great deal of group work in intermediate level courses such as the one in business ethics. Students are often presented with a question to discuss in groups of four or five. In the senior seminar, which has fewer students, he invites them to interrupt his remarks with questions and comments. His manner in general is encouraging and non-threatening.

In the classes I observed, student participation was lively. What characterizes content in both classes is an emphasis on understanding problems and questions rather than on the conveying of information. When asked to describe the successful paper he said, "I am not asking for a thesis. I am not asking for one answer, though there are a finite number of possible appropriate responses to the assignment. These are working papers. I want to see students explore ideas in a way that is clear and cogent, as if they are explaining them in a way a philosopher would explain them."

This study, along with others such as Herrington's, indicates that we need a new "write to learn" theory, one less dogmatic in its conceptions of what constitutes good opportunities for learning and self-enhancement and which avoids simplistic over-generalized inferences about writing assignments. It is clear, for example, that the students in this study exhibited strong task engagement, an important variable according to research on task involvement that is

ignored in many writing across the curriculum discussions. The task in and of itself can provide compelling motivation to learn, according to several studies, and in some cases learning is actually more inherently valuable and satisfying when attention is focused on the task rather than the self (Nicholls).

Furthermore, the notion that assignment genre is the major factor (perhaps the only factor) in dictating student response is surely naive. How they view the teacher as audience seems to be equally important. Britton himself, a strong advocate of the expressive genre, reminds us, however, that students develop views about what kind of audience the teacher will be for their papers from a variety of experiences with that teacher, writing being only one such experience (65). And in the area of assignment design we need to understand much more than we now do about the effect on students' attitudes towards the assignment of the specific assignment question and how that question is structured. For example, we need to pay more attention to discussions by Kinneavy and others who urge us to assign other of writing besides the "explaining and proving," paper, such as assignments that encourage exploratory and persuasive discourse.

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(After Works Cited)

Acknowledgement: I would like to thank Anne Herrington for reviewing this paper.

Student Questionnaire Writing in Philosophy

Circle one: freshman sophomore junior senior

Major_____ Course number_____

Please answer these questions in terms of your understanding of the formal writing assignments in this course.

Purpose: Please circle on a scale of 1-6 indicating to what degree each of the following is one of your purposes in writing the formal papers.

	Not at all					Very much
1. Exploring and shaping my own ideas about a subject.	1	2	3	4	5	6
2. Convincing someone to take some action	1	2	3	4	5	6
3. Informing someone of something.	1	2	3	4	5	6
4. Demonstrating my knowledge of something.	1	2	3	4	5	6
5. Proving a point about something.	1	2	3	4	5	6
6. Interpreting some subject or data.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
7. Solving a problem.	1	2	3	4	5	6
8. Instructing someone	1	2	3	4	5	6

Audience: Who is the primary audience for these papers,that is to whom are you writing them? Please indicate by circling (1) after that audience from the list below. If you have a secondary audience in mind as well,circle (2). Circle (0) if you do not think of this person as a potential reader.

	1=primary	2=secondary	0=not audience
9. Professor	1	2	0
10.Other students	1	2	0
11.Myself	1	2	0

Conventions and Format

12. In terms of the other writing you do at school are these papers less, the same or more formal?

less_____ the same_____ more formal_____

13. In terms of other writing at school is it less, the same or more acceptable to use pronouns "I" and "we"?

less_____ the same _____ more_____

Content

What does the instructor want you to do in the paper?

	Not at all					Very much
14. Summarize material from class discussion and readings	1	2	3	4	5	6
15. Synthesize material from class discussion and readings in orignal relationships.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
16. Present orignal ideas not expressed in class or in readings.	1	2	3	4	5	6
17. Present material he already knows	1	2	3	4	5	6